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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

The Communist idea in the U.S. — and there’s a lot in common in many developed countries — was that you had to tack onto popular struggles over things like rent, wages, union recognition and be the most militant in those struggles, and there would be some magical way in which those struggles would transmute into the idea of socialism. Jimmy did not believe that. He believed that you had to go out and argue for socialism and explain to people about capitalism.

I never agreed with Jimmy about that because I could see how irrational the masses of people are and that his idea was just much too rationalistic — that people would understand and you could just, on a mass basis, explain socialism to people. But the power of his vision always influenced me. Jimmy recruited me in the middle of the New Left, and I didn’t even understand why there would be a need for a journal then. Since we had the New Left, why did we need anything else? Jimmy said that it’s just going to go haywire, and it’s going to be crazy, and so you had to have consciousness and theory. He had that Leninist idea but without the vanguard-party part of it, and that greatly influenced me.

The other thing that led me to write the book was the Obama presidency. I could see that — and I still hold this view — the election of Obama in 2008 was of such historic importance in terms of the first black president. The conjuncture of the total failure of the Bush presidency, both in Iraq, in foreign policy, bringing about the large-scale recession that we had in 2008 and that was such an opportunity for Obama. I could see not only that he was not interested in taking up that opportunity, but his whole idea was that we go back, i.e., “recover,” whereas the right idea was to say, “look at the nature of the crisis that brought us into this situation: we have to go in a new direction.” He kept saying, “we can recover from this, let’s go back to where we were.” In particular, what struck me was the inability of Leftists to criticize Obama. Of course, I was not surprised by this because the whole Left culture that I had grown up in, from the 70s, was so centered on identity politics. Its tone was from the women’s movement, and there was a self-protective

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talk to people about capitalism versus socialism. socialism. They did not believe you could actually Communists did not believe you could agitate for been a Communist for a number of years — the and what the Communists believed. Jimmy had vanguard party which was obviously Lenin’s idea by his ideas. He’s opposed to the idea of the to what Jimmy believed, and I was influenced to be extended, for dental care.” That was sort in West Virginia, if they don’t want Medicare should tax the rich to pay for things. Ask people in West Virginia if they don’t believe that we Joe Manchin, and Sanders said, “ask the people heard Sanders yesterday talk about U.S. Senator the word socialism, but it’s still the basic idea. I sort of like Bernie Sanders. Sanders doesn’t use explain socialism on a mass scale to people — the idea that the most important thing was to had independent sources of income. Jimmy had *Times*. He was a professional revolutionary. He the Left. He went on to edit and create *These* Jimmy had strong ideas about how to organize a historian of the old Debsian Socialist Party.

— the movement of capitalism from the factory, to other people who didn’t believe that, like Tom Hayden, who was also an editor. He thought it was irrelevant or misleading to talk about socialism. He wasn’t afraid of anti-communism; he just didn’t believe that socialism should be this organizing idea, which others did. So through Marty, I got recruited to edit a new journal, which was *Socialist Revolution*, left my position as a young academic, and went out to edit this journal in San Francisco in 1970.

My parents were immigrants from the Ukraine. They never referred to it as Ukraine — they always referred to it as Russia. They didn’t even refer to it as the Soviet Union, which was the proper name. Later in my life, when I look back on it, I realized that my parents had been in a kind of Left-wing world that was part of the background of their life as Jewish immigrants to New York. They were not Leftists, but there were plenty of Leftists in their world. Later, for example, I learned that an uncle of mine had almost joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and coincidentally, I had written my Master’s thesis on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade before I became a Leftist. I had an unconscious memory of a cultural Leftism from immigrant Jewish New York before I became conscious of it.

DLJ: We got a chance to read your book *Why America Needs a Left*. Were some of these ideas that led to the creation of this book germinating throughout your experiences, like reflecting back upon the New Left? What led you to write the book?

EZ: Two things led me to write the book. One is that I was recruited to edit *Socialist Revolution*,

On July 18, 2022, Platypus Affiliated Society interviewed Eli Zaretsky, professor of history at The New School for Social Research, about his book *Why America Needs a Left (2012) and the significance of the history and legacy of the New Left for the possibility of a Left today*.

D. L. Jacobs: Could you tell us about your background — how you came to Marxism and/or the Left?

Eli Zaretsky: I was born in 1940, and I was unaware of Marxism or the Left at the conscious level until somewhere around 1966, when I was in my mid-20s. If you have ever heard of Martin Sklar, he’s a Left-wing historian. He’s dead now. 1965 or 66, and he said, it’s really their canal. It doesn’t belong to us, etc. That had never crossed my mind before. After that happened, I got involved — that was the New Left.

Marty was an editor of *Studies on the Left*, which had been formed as a somewhat Marxist journal among American historians, and it had a big intellectual influence. There was an argument among the editors of *Studies on the Left* as to whether the journal should be socialist. So there were people on the journal like Christopher Lasch, Eugene Genovese, and Jimmy Weinstein, who wanted a socialist journal and wanted to argue for socialism in the American context. These were people who had a background in communism and had left the Communist Party, and thought of the Party in terms of its failures to develop a theory appropriate to the U.S., i.e., appropriate to the changes in class structure that had taken place in the U.S. since the 1930s

The Left has transformed the world

An interview with Eli Zaretsky

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www:

What is the critique of capitalism?

Tom Canel, D. L. Jacobs, Daniel Lazare, Saira Rafee, Jochen Schmon

identity paradigm? Are there lessons that we can learn from that Left right now? Can we learn to overcome it if that is an issue?

EZ: When I wrote *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* in the early 70s, the women’s movement had just appeared, and the history of what had happened with that book is actually instructive in this regard. I was saying that we needed a kind of socialism that could understand the issue of women’s oppression and women’s liberation. This was a socialist issue as I understood socialism — that we couldn’t restrict socialism to the economy; we’d have to extend it to the family. The family was part of the structure of the capitalist system. Capitalism separated the family and the economy, and in that way obscured their relationship. You could see capitalism constantly covering its tracks. It’s constantly destroying, because it destroys everything of the past, and it turns everything into the same thing, which is basically commodities. The growth of capitalism had separated the family from the economy, and the Left had to see the connection between the family and the economy, that the oppression that took place in the family was related to an oppressive economic system, which was capitalism. Yet, at the same time, one had to recognize this separation. You couldn’t have a Left that was just going to reform the economy and expect that things would change in terms of sexual relations or gender relations automatically. They have to be understood as having autonomy of their own. It’s not *that* complicated, but it is a little bit like chewing gum and walking at the same time. The situation of women could not be reduced to the economy, but it was also related to the way in which capitalism as something more than an economic system, as a social system, had transformed itself. The book was criticized by feminists who developed the idea that you have to understand there are two different systems, the economic system and the family system, which is the opposite of what I was saying. They said there were two different systems, and you needed one movement that dealt with the economy, and a different movement to deal with patriarchy, and so that I was only dealing with capitalism, not with patriarchy. It is an intellectual mistake, even though there is some truth to it, but there’s some truth to everything, really. It came out of a very profound need — a lot of anger, a lot of powerful feelings. Revolutions are deeply emotional. These things start up very profound feelings, and people

took the path of least resistance, which is that women are suffering from the patriarchy. There’s also an unfair economic system, and we need to deal with both.

DLJ: Returning to both of Martins’s questions. what is perhaps missing today and also is an obstacle to the Left? I’m thinking of the question of the Left and progress and how, with respect to the women’s question, one of the problems with capitalism and the question of progress is that it creates *false necessity*. An example of that could be the “Wages for Housework” movement. Angela Davis had a response to it, which was: not wages for housework, but abolish housework. I.e., it could look like it’s progress if we were going to start paying women for their formerly unpaid labor, but what about the opportunity that capitalism has for abolishing itself and therefore overcoming these structures and not merely making them better or more equal?⁵

Is the problem with the Left how it thinks of itself? You put it like this in the Popular Front chapter as more militant progressives, more Left progressives, or strong progressives. It identifies too strongly with progressivism, going all the way back to the beginning of the 20th century. E.g., Teddy Roosevelt’s party comes out and Lenin writes an article saying, look, these are the Liberals demonstrating that they’re afraid of socialism in the 1912 election;⁶ or likewise FDR’s Commonwealth Club address,⁷ where he says things that sound Marxist — that there’s been a change since the 18th century, it’s large-scale machinery, it’s not manufacturing; it’s not handicraft. Today, what would a Left have to take up? Is it defining equality or extending equality? Is it exhausted?

EZ: The question of equality is certainly not exhausted. Why do you say that? On the contrary, liberalism, which is the political expression of capitalism, is totally committed to equality, but it’s formal equality. It’s equality before the law, and the Left brings in real equality, substantive equality. All of these issues of women’s liberation are probing what equality really means.

DLJ: Isn’t that still in the FDR framework where he says that the government has to respond to changes in society?⁸ Woodrow Wilson as well, in *The New Freedom* (1912), notes that we can no longer rely on the contract as it was thought of with Jefferson, but now the government has to step in to establish a real equality.⁹

EZ: I think that would be fantastic if we could get back to that. What’s wrong with that? Sounds pretty good to me.

DLJ: The Left of the time recognized that it was a counter-revolution!

EZ: No, it’s not a counter-revolution. No, you’re right. I’m trying to tell my fellow Americans that we have a precious legacy, which is the idea of the Left. This is something precious to preserve, and you have to do it through a social movement: you can’t do it through individual books or individual actions. It has to be lived out in people’s lives, which is a lot of what the Left is. A lot of it has to do with how you live your life, and that’s why I think the abolitionists pose the question of what it means to live in a racially integrated society as opposed to a society that’s formally free. In the Roosevelt period and today, the Left looks beyond immediate necessity. It’s not about immediate necessity. It is taking a big picture, seeing the direction in which you are going. Aristotle says, to understand causes, you have to have four different causes, and one of them is having a goal. What is precious is not only the Left, but the idea of the Left. We had a Left before we had the idea of the Left. Nobody in the 19th century thought they were the Left. The idea of the Left only came in after the Russian Revolution, in the 1920s. There was no Left in the 19th century. You would not have a Left because it’s a European idea, and the U.S. has a two-party system; in Europe, It’s very important who sits on the Left and who sits on the Right, because you have Leftists, centrists and conservatives, and they are distributed between Left and Right.

DLJ: But doesn’t Jefferson identify with the Jacobins? Therefore, he would identify with the Left-wing of the National Assembly.

EZ: He doesn’t exactly identify with the Jacobins, but yes, fair enough. What we have in America that’s very strong, probably stronger than any other country except self-governing colonies like Australia or New Zealand, is that we are a populist country. Jefferson wasn’t a populist, but there’s a populist element. Jackson is a populist. That’s not the Left. The Left has to criticize the people, the voice of the people, and distinguish itself from “the people.” Ernesto Laclau believed that we could reform the Left on the basis of the idea of the people, but that would be populism, and I don’t agree with that. Intellectuality is important to the Left. That’s why Sanders again — it’s such a model because he talked about how the system actually worked and why it was unjust.

DLJ: You end your book talking about Occupy, which last year had its 10-year anniversary, as expressing the tradition of the Left, because they were challenging the equality as set down by the Obama administration at the time, and that seemed to be one of the background impetuses to writing this book. How do you reflect on things since then, in the last 10 years, with the emergence of what might be called the Millennial Left — the opportunities missed?

EZ: Throughout history, there are opportunities being missed constantly. Occupy Wall Street was a missed opportunity. I can be concrete about this because I tried to effect that — you just see this over and over again throughout the history of the Left. People don’t want to listen. The Left is not made up of people who are smarter than the rest of the society. It’s made up of stubborn people who think they know everything and have all the human failings that everybody has. I always take bad photographs, or at least, I always think photographs of me are bad, but the best photograph that was ever taken of me was by Professor Julia Ott during Occupy Wall Street. I was so happy. I’d been waiting since the late 60s / early 70s for something like this. I thought it was fantastic. Now, I had two ideas for what Occupy should do. I was in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964, and we recruited voters among black people in Mississippi, and we brought them to the Democratic Convention and challenged the Mississippi delegates, asking who was the legitimate representative? Every convention has a credentials committee that has to approve who are the official, real representatives, and you can challenge. You could say these people discriminated against blacks, women, etc. It was a fantastic opportunity. I wanted people from Occupy to go to the 2012 Democratic convention and challenge the representatives of the other delegations by saying they only represent the 1%; we represent the 99%. It would have been a huge news story; we would have brought the connection to the federal government — we would have picketed the convention instead of just going along

with the renomination. I couldn’t get anybody to see that this was a good idea. The other idea I had was to have teach-ins of the sort that we had during the 60s, that were based on Vietnam. Now you could have teach-ins that were based on Wall Street and finance and how it dominates society and culture. You could have teach-ins about film, literature, the housing market, climate change, etc. It would show how these things are all connected. So many people who know a lot would come to these things. They’re entertaining. You meet great people — you make friends, find lovers, etc. But I couldn’t get anybody to do it.

DLJ: I thought I saw a teach-in during Occupy by Dean Baker,¹⁰ who is somebody who predicted the housing bubble.¹¹

Occupy was a direct protest of the Democratic Party. Yet, the following year — because I am old enough to have participated in Occupy — I saw a lot of my friends who had been arrested during Occupy get behind and vote for Obama again in 2012, to stop Mitt Romney. Romney was understood as the “fascist.” I wonder about that missed opportunity, then, with respect to the rest of the 2010s. When I saw Sanders, I thought, we just had a protest against the Democratic Party, and yet people were again just going along with the Democratic Party.

EZ: You mean with Biden?

DLJ: Well, he was the most explicit expression of it, but even in terms of 2016.

EZ: Going along with Hillary Clinton? —

DLJ: Or Sanders. Occupy was also a protest against the Democratic Party.

EZ: I agree. Well, with Obama, everybody was organized in terms of protecting Obama because they had the idea that you couldn’t criticize a black person, which is ridiculous. Of course you can criticize a black person or a woman. That’s part of the culture of identity: you don’t want to “trigger” anything. You know what a dependency group is? The whole country was organized as a dependency group to protect Obama for eight years. That’s quite a setback for a country, to have eight years devoted to protecting the potential hurt feelings of a particular individual. We had no criticism at all.

DLJ: It could be extended beyond eight years to 12 or 16 years.

EZ: I agree with you. When Roosevelt died in 1945, I think it was Martha Gellhorn, or some reporter, who said, “Thank God, because finally that’s going to liberate the Left,” but it didn’t. Most of the abolitionists just gave up on the question of race as soon as slavery was abolished. So it is just issue after issue. Also, capitalists are very smart and well organized, and they run the system, and they know how to run it. They know how to flatter people; they know how to integrate people into the system. That’s why there has to be a Left that can fight that.

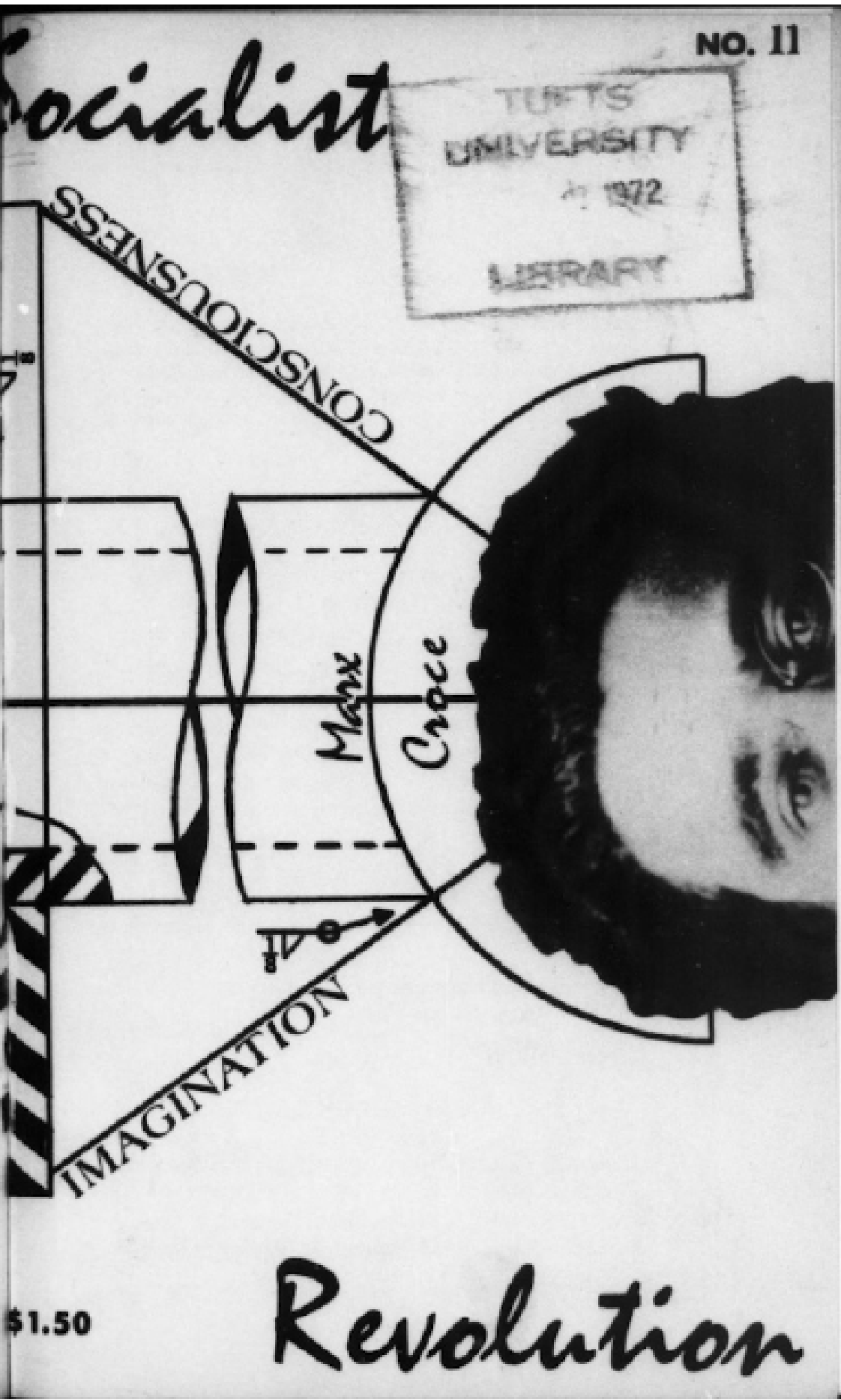
DLJ: In your book, you reference an article by Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt” (1954), arguing the Democrats had become the conservative party,¹² where even Eisenhower and the Republicans were getting in line with the New Deal. That raises the contradictory character of Leftism under capitalism — that it ends up being conservative. It ends up even inverting from its previous period of being the revolutionary change. It becomes a kind of cunning conservatism, right?

EZ: No, I’m more impressed by the successes of the Left over the last 200 years than I am of its failures. The U.S. today is heading toward being a failed state with these Supreme Court decisions, and the politics, and the inability to address obvious things like climate change, guns, the economy, etc. That’s because of the defeat of the New Left. The only thing that has repeatedly got the country on a good track has been the Left. The U.S. is a great country in some ways. But insofar as it’s a great country, it’s been because of its Left. Its Left is what has saved it over and over again. That’s what brought the Civil War to the issue of slavery. That is a fantastic achievement. The New Deal was a fantastic achievement. When Roosevelt was elected in 1932, there were four million people in the Ku Klux Klan. There was a huge reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution, to immigration in the 1920s with the Red Scare, and with the Immigration Act of 1924, you got a second Ku Klux Klan. Yet, within a couple of years, we won Social Security. We won legitimizing unions, and the Civil Rights Movement starts with the New Deal.

RWM: But in the end of your book, you identify the New Left as ultimately a failure; that it made some mistakes, and those mistakes need to be



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corrected by a new movement. You give two senses of failure. One sense of failure is that the Left always fails. And the second sense of failure is that they made errors that can be fixed, and that we need only a new opportunity to fix them. You say, “In another sense, however, the left may fail by committing remediable errors, errors that need to be corrected if future lefts are to flourish.”¹³ It seems that you are placing a value in learning what the failure was, for the possibility of a new Left. Do you not think that there’s anything that a new Left now needs to learn from the past, from the fact that the Left has not yet been able to transform the world?

EZ: But I think the Left *has* transformed the world. What I meant in the passage you quoted was the failure to keep going, to continue as a Left. I.e., when you got the explosion of identity politics, which was a product of the New Left, it should have been possible to support mass movements for women’s liberation that were not going to be a Left movement, or mass movements for gay liberation that were not going to be a Left movement. The failure to do that is a remediable failure of the New Left. One could make a complicated and deep analysis, but basically it is psychology that prevented that from happening. You would have had to have conflicts inside the women’s liberation movement between the Left and the rest of the movement; you would have to have conflicts inside gay liberation. It’s much easier to forget it — to say we are just for all women.

DLJ: When it’s put as a failure to keep going, it brings to mind this idea of reform or revolution. By the Left, do we mean that we’re constantly approximating towards an ever-closer ideal? The Left has transformed things, but thinking back to the way that Rosa Luxemburg responded to Eduard Bernstein, it can transform things by reorganizing the contradiction. It can look like there’s progress here, but there could also be regression. There could be a kind of contradictory character of change. Is the Left approximating something?

EZ: I believe in having a goal and progressing toward that goal. I just don’t believe what the liberal vision of the theory of progress holds. I don’t believe it comes automatically out of economic development or out of technology — that’s the liberal version. But I believe in having goals, and I do think there’s progress. I taught

a course on *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) a couple of years ago, and all through that book, they are making fun of disabled people. It would never occur to Cervantes that there was anything wrong with laughing at dwarfs or people who had no legs. He thought it was funny, and his audience obviously thought it was funny. And then, at a certain point, it just became inconceivable, and that’s the same thing about rape, sexual harassment, and slavery. There is a lot happening today that people will be ashamed of in the future. Right now it’s hard to see.

Incidentally, the Left can arise today, just on the basis of the current situation. It isn’t necessary to go back to the New Left and say that it was a failed project in this way, or that we’re going to build on that or something like that anymore. What the New Left did was reconsider the Old Left. It’s useful to know the history, but the questions about how we evaluate the New Left aren’t important after that. We could build a Left today because there’s been a big change among young people — turning away from the identity paradigm and seeking more of an anti-capitalist framework that brings in questions of identity. I see that happening, and there’s a lot of potential for a Left today. The problem is that things have gotten in my view so bad, mostly because of the Democratic Party. What happened with the Democratic Party is what happens when you don’t have a Left, when you just let them do their thing. They just gave more and more away to the Republicans and fought for less and less. The country, I don’t have to tell you, is in terrible shape. Whether a Left today can take that on, no one knows. But, we don’t have to understand what happened to the New Left in order to build a Left today.

DLJ: I want to agree that — you don’t have to try to emulate past things. But the Millennial Left in the 2010s reproduced moments of the New Left. There’s been call-out culture, there’s been cancel culture, there’s been all sorts of accusations of different things. The Left split on whether Sanders was “race-blind” — all of these things came back in a sense through the self-identified Left itself, not Nancy Pelosi saying something to Jacobin. Within the Left itself they seemed to reproduce these past problems. Even during Occupy, I remember, certain cities’ occupations fell apart based on hand-wringing: “There’s too many white people; there’s too many men, men are talking too much.” You cite George Packer’s “The New Liberalism” (2008)¹⁴ that thought Obama was going to be like

FDR. There was a kind of expectation going into it where people spontaneously look to the past, and they do so because past moments continue to reproduce themselves in the present. That is why it seems like the question of history comes back whether we like it or not: it manifests itself and demands to be grasped as such.

EZ: Yeah. I’d be the last person to say that it’s irrelevant to study history. I’m a historian, and I truly believe in history: it’s important; it’s valuable. But when I was writing the book, it was clear that there were two moments that I wanted to deal with: one was the abolitionists and the other was the New Deal. And then the question came up in the book of the status of the third moment: was the New Left an episode that happened in the 60s and 70s or was it some kind of continuing force, so that today’s activists were still part of the New Left? I believe it is continuing, and that the movements of today are part of the New Left, but at the same time, the people who are making those movements should feel free, because the people who made the New Left felt free. It was an exhilarating moment to create an entirely New Left. The Old Left that descended from the French Revolution was sort of sacrosanct. To create a whole New Left that brought in issues like sexuality was great, and people should feel the same thing today. I don’t know how to empower people to feel that way, but that’s what I wish. I do think that it’s happening; there is a lot of Left consciousness today. In the 60s, we were coming off of a period where you couldn’t imagine that the country was going to go toward the Right. The New Deal had been so successful and had won so much popular support. We were unaware of the elements that were questioning it beneath the surface or even on the surface. Maybe we didn’t want to pay attention. When I went out to edit this magazine, everybody was on the Left, and everybody wanted to join this magazine, or be associated with the magazine. And this was a magazine that was called *Socialist Revolution*. It was a shock when Nixon won in 1968, but it was also the continued rise of the Right and its power which rests on populism. The Left today has a big problem.

DLJ: Since we’re talking about Occupy: Trump in many ways at least ran in 2016 on demands that were there from the Millennial Left. He at least positioned himself as an anti-war president, at least had his daughter say that they were going to do some kind of childcare thing — he said he wanted to position the Republican Party as a “worker’s party.”¹⁵ Is there something to learn from Trump in terms of the missed opportunity for the Left?

EZ: Absolutely. I would have supported Trump if it hadn’t been for the racism, which was a complete disqualification from my point of view. The Left, in embracing women within the home as a Left issue and embracing race as a Left issue, turned away from the industrial working class, which was going into deindustrialization and opioid addiction, etc., and they were just sitting there waiting. Bannon saw that, and Trump and Sanders saw that. Trump got a lot from Sanders: he imitated Sanders, he got the word “rigged” from Sanders, who was saying the economy is rigged, and then Trump took it over. I think Trump was right about Russia —

DLJ: Trump and NATO.

EZ: Yeah, Trump and NATO. Absolutely. Why do we need NATO? You know, especially starting in 1991 when Russia had basically disarmed. Why did we continue NATO? It’s an aggressive alliance that is going to cause problems. I mean the whole way they set it up about isolationism versus internationalism — who’s not going to be in favor of internationalism? Who wants to be an isolationist? Trump’s withdrawal from a lot of the world was a good thing. Most of our involvement is destructive and militaristic. There were a lot of things in Trump that were good, but it was all corrupted by racism and divisiveness.

DLJ: From this thesis of your book, that would seem to reflect the absence of the Left. You also mentioned that about the Democratic Party today.

EZ: Right.

RWM: We in Platypus say, “The Left is dead! Long live the Left!,” but you’ve been telling us that there is a potential for a Left today. What is that potential you see today? What should intellectuals, activists, social movements, Leftists harness today to achieve the Left as you describe?

EZ: The ground for a Left today is the idea of capitalism. It is the awareness of the way in which all of our problems are related to one another,

because we live in a system that is irrational and unjust. It doesn’t mean that we’re going to get rid of capitalism, and we certainly are not going to deny the advances that were made by capitalism including things like the market. We’re not going to deny that this is valuable in how capitalism is linked to scientific development. But we are never going to get a rational politics, i.e., a politics based on social justice and on realities like climate change, until we get a handle on capitalism. Then we see that all of these different problems that women face, that black people face, are all connected to capitalism. It’s not much of an answer, but whatever criticisms of Sanders you want to make — you mentioned some of them — I thought he was fantastic, and he showed the potential. He was able to bring young blacks into a movement, and he was able to speak to industrial workers, women, etc. We need to have a multi-issue movement based on a diversified, variegated working class, and then the thing that we all have in common is our dependence on the capitalist system. We need some control, more control, over that system — “small-d” democratic justice, social justice. It’s not rocket science. This has been going on for a long time. **JP**

¹ Eli Zaretsky, *Why America Needs a Left: A Historical Argument* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 169: “That the tradition of the left never died in America was apparent during the 2008 Democratic primary. Hope is invariably the basis for the left, and ‘hope’ was the slogan of Barack Obama’s campaign. When people tell me today that they were not stirred by that campaign, I don’t believe them. Only someone without a heart could have failed to be moved by a call not for a change in policy but a change in mindset. Had Obama moved in the direction his campaign implied, we would today be witnessing the characteristic conflict between liberalism and the left that marks the great eras of reform. Instead he chose to occupy a vacuous ‘bipartisan’ ‘center,’ which inevitably let the right and its corporate allies hold the country hostage, greatly deepening the crisis we are in. It will not be easy to turn our backs on the country’s first black President but it is necessary if we are to make any progress at all.”

² Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization (2022).

³ Josiah Quincy, Chapter IV, in *Memoir of the Life of John Quincy Adams*, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee, and Company, 1860), available online at <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/20256/pg20256-images.html>>.

⁴ Zaretsky, *Why America Needs a Left*, 102.

⁵ Angela Davis, Chapter 13, in *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

⁶ V.I. Lenin, “The Results and Significance of the U.S. Presidential Elections” (1912), available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1912/nov/09.htm>>.

⁷ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Campaign Address on Progressive Government at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, California” (September 23, 1932).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1912), available online at <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14811/14811-h/14811-h.htm>>.

¹⁰ Center for Economic and Policy Research, “Dean Baker Occupy DC Teach-in on a Financial Transaction Cost” (October 29, 2011), available online at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYUHGJhduts>>.

¹¹ Dean Baker, “The Run-Up in Home Prices: Is It Real or Is It Another Bubble?,” *Center for Economic and Policy Research* (August 5, 2022), available online at <https://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/housing_2002_08.htm>.

¹² Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” *The American Scholar* (Winter 1954–55), available online at <<https://theamericanscholar.org/the-pseudo-conservative-revolt/>>.

¹³ Zaretsky, *Why America Needs a Left*, 157–58.

¹⁴ George Packer, “The New Liberalism,” *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2008, available online at <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/11/17/the-new-liberalism>>.

¹⁵ Nick Gass, “Trump: GOP will become ‘worker’s party’ under me,” *Politico*, May 26, 2016, available online at <<https://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/trump-gop-workers-party-223598>>.

element to the Left — you didn't criticize people on the Left. My view was the opposite of that: criticism, self-criticism.

DLJ: When saying that Obama did represent something of the tradition of the Left, you talk about hope and change at the end of your book.¹ Could you talk about what you see as defining the Left?

EZ: I'm surprised to hear that I said something good about Obama. The basic idea in the book is that it's in the nature of capitalism to reform itself and to change, but that at every major point at which it changes, it can change in two different directions. What the capitalist class and intellectuals who identify with the capitalist class — which is to say most intellectuals — want to do is reform capitalism so it becomes better for the capitalists. At each of these junctures at which capitalism reforms itself, there's a possibility of reforming capitalism in such a way as to benefit and bring about greater equality, more substantial equality. The Left is the movement, the consciousness, the people who seek greater equality. It is hard to say where they come from, because it's not self-interest. Marxists used to say about the working class, that it's in their interest, etc. Of course, people operate in terms of their interests, but that's not where the Left comes from. A lot of it does come out of moral sentiments and people for whom questions of justice are central in their lives, which is not most people, if it doesn't directly affect them. The Left is that part of politics that tries to agitate those movements of transformation, of reform in the direction of a greater equality for all rather than in the direction of keeping the system as it's been going.

DLJ: You start off your book by discussing the abolitionists. It seems like the Left precedes the abolitionists. I.e., in terms of the question of society developing, growing, and integrating more and more people who are marginalized. That's what the bourgeois revolutions were. You can find that with someone like Rousseau, or, in the American and French revolutions: the question of integrating people into bourgeois society through the right to sell your labor. So why do you start on the Left in the U.S. with the abolitionists? Why there as opposed to perhaps the American Revolution? Or there are even interim periods like the 1800 Revolution of Jefferson, where there is a question already about where the American Revolution is going. Is it going to be like a new financial aristocracy, or is it going to fulfill the desiderata?

EZ: That's a very good question, and I'm not prepared off the top of my head to answer it adequately. There is a revolutionary possibility in capitalism. Bourgeois revolution sees itself as a revolution for all people, and it does stand for individual freedom. One of the things I am trying to say in the book is that there's a cliché that the European countries have a Left but that the U.S. doesn't. I'm trying to say that we have one of the most profound Lefts in the world, but it's closely related to the liberal tradition. We don't have the Marxist Left that France, Italy, or Germany had, but we have a Left that is trying to bring out the submerged, radical character of liberalism. America's contribution to the Left globally is to bring out the radical potential of liberalism.

So all of the things that you mentioned — the American Revolution, the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800, the Puritans, Rousseau — the liberal ideal in my view — and R. W. Martins will tell you about this because we've talked about this — is that of the absolute priority and sanctity of individual freedom, and that you can't justify anything if you cannot respect individual freedom. I believe in it. I believe that is something that should be part of the Left, and I think the strength of the American Left is its close relationship to that. That's why America has pioneered the Civil Rights Movement, which was globally pioneering, even though we were the most slave-dominated society. We also pioneered feminism — all of these movements that have to do with sexuality. This abortion decision is like the reinstitution of slavery.² All these movements that in many ways started in America and spread throughout the world, and centered on the question of individual freedom — I think they are fantastic.

As to why I chose the abolitionists, it's more a question of intuition. I.e., when you write history, there's no truly scientific way of writing history. You have to tell a story that is plausible. You want to put things in a relation to one another that people can understand. I concede that we have very radical ideas — Tom Paine, etc. — earlier, but I put the abolitionists there because of the weight of slavery. I was trying to get away from the idea

that the Left must be connected to capitalism, and that the Left arises with Marx and industrial labor. The encounter with slavery is more profound than the encounter with industrial labor, because the encounter with industrial labor has to do with alienation and exploitation — but capitalism is based on violent dispossession, and the encounter with slavery brings that out. It brings out the importance of the body. You see that in Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. So that's why I think historically the weight of that becomes the moment when you not only have radical currents in the liberal tradition and radicals who are trying to bring out what's radical in that tradition, but you get a social movement, namely abolitionism, which founds the Left.

DLJ: I was just watching the movie *Amistad* (1997) the other day and thinking about your book. You quote, in your book, John Quincy Adams, talking about the South as the "battle-field upon which the last great conflict must be fought between slavery and emancipation."³ Likewise, when W. E. B. Du Bois writes *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), he refers back to Reconstruction in the 1930s. The Civil Rights Movement had considered itself the "second Abolitionist movement." This raises the question about progress in capitalism and the Left in capitalism. At all these periods of transition, there seems to be a return to the kind of liberal, bourgeois starting point. You've just mentioned how in America, there's a special relationship of Marxism to liberalism in a way that is maybe more bound up with something more Left — say, Red Republicanism in Europe. How can one talk about progress and capitalism? You said that capitalism has to transform itself in order to preserve itself, and the question is, how do we know if the transformation is in a more progressive direction or not? Even equalization can be a new way of re-establishing the conditions for proletarianization: when you can bring in women in order to undermine the unions or even after Reconstruction, the emancipation of the slaves increased labor supply or greater proletarianization. Not out of the bad will of anybody but out of a crisis. So how does one recognize if transformation is progress or not? One could say, even the three Lefts that you have, they are always raising the question of progress, e.g., the New Left asking, was the New Deal progress?

EZ: Again, that's a good question. What you say deepens the analysis in the book; it doesn't really challenge it. The book is called *Why America Needs a Left*. Obama is a perfectly good example of that. Who could imagine that the election of a black president wasn't enormous progress? I suppose technically it was, although, it's hard to

see how. I.e., for a lot of black people obviously it was meaningful. But, it set the agenda at such a low level in terms of what the country could do. That's a good example of where everyone is cheering with the sense we are progressing, and in a way, it was a huge setback compared to the consciousness during Bush. What people felt the need for was dramatic change in the way the country was being run. You need a Left because you need a level of consciousness. It's like the ego inside the mind. You can't have individuals who act purely on instinct. There has to be a level of self-regulation in a society, a level of self-awareness, and that's what the Left does. It raises those kinds of questions that you just raised.

R. W. Martins: Is there something blocking the possibility of a new Left? We do need a Left, but what is the historical condition impeding this right now?

EZ: The main obstacle to the Left today is the power of the identity paradigm. There is so much positive within it: the coming into self-awareness of stigmatized groups, excluded groups — women, gays — that is the dominant consciousness of our time, and there's been a kind of revolution going on around that. Sanders demonstrated how a Left would be possible today. One could talk about the need to recognize stigmatized groups and the need to extend the realm of individual rights, and the role of capitalism and the need to get some control over the capitalist system — obviously for climate change, but for so many reasons, e.g. to provide basic security to all people. It's not that hard to understand. Sanders was successful in doing that. The whole political culture, certainly since World War I, which was a turning point, is based on stigmatizing and excluding the Left. It's similar to the way that heretics were persecuted in the Middle Ages. They try to make it seem like the heretic thinks they believe in the true God and that you're just dumb to believe in the Church. They think they're better than you, they're secretly out for themselves, etc. The irrational powers against the Left are strong.

But the powers of the Left are also strong. There was a real shot with Sanders, and of course, they organized to shoot him down. He would have won the primary, had the primaries proceeded normally. It was an organized coup within the Democratic Party to make sure that he didn't win the nomination after the South Carolina primary, when Buttigieg and Klobuchar both pulled out on the same day — organized by Obama, incidentally. The emotional power of the identity paradigm can be overcome; we definitely could have a Left.

I was just in Germany. They're starting a German *Jacobin*, and a thousand kids came to hear Jeremy Corbyn. Nancy Fraser gave lectures

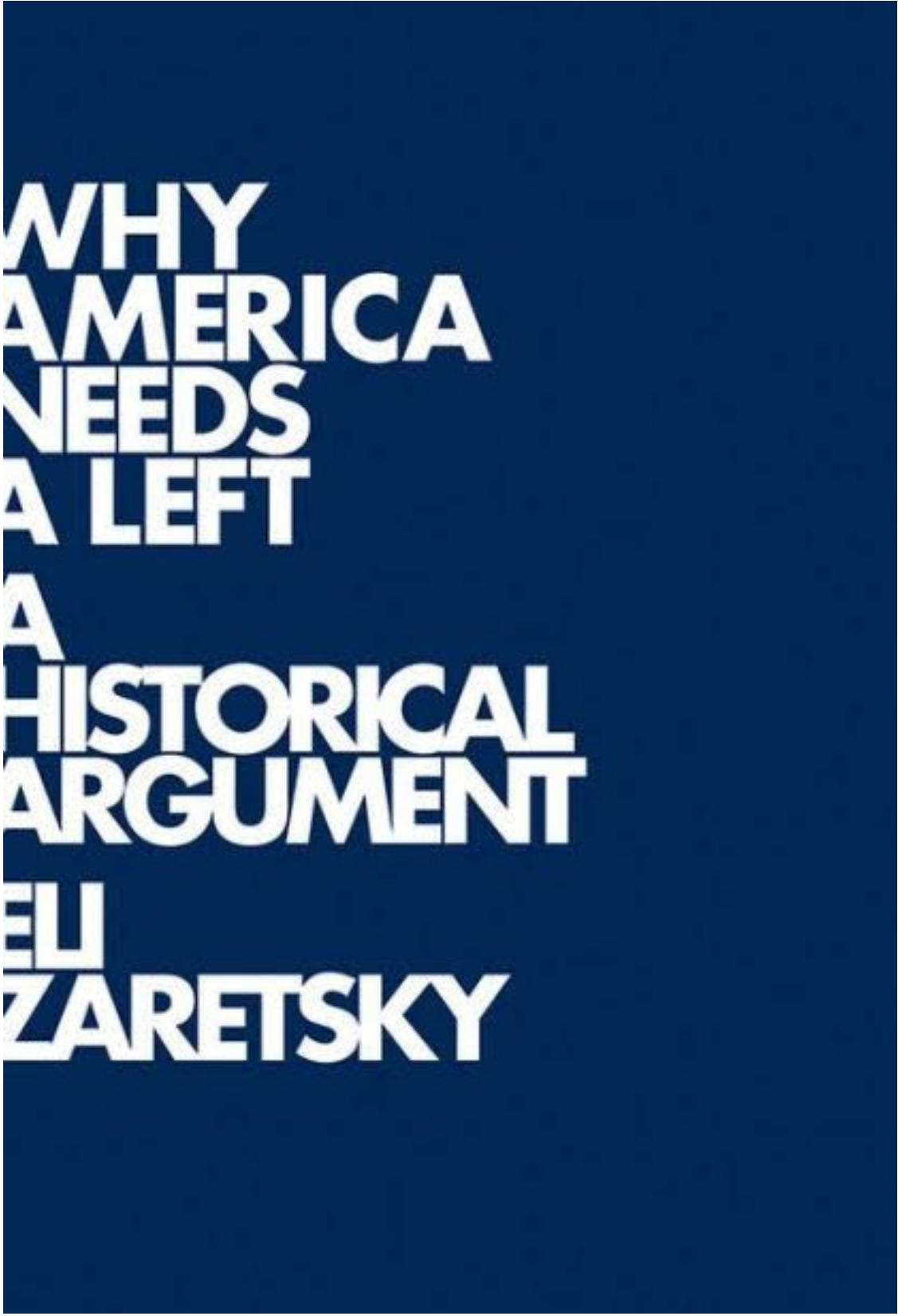
in Berlin where they had more than 1,000 people at each lecture — three lectures in a row. There's nothing in this situation that makes it impossible. Why didn't we have a more successful Left in the 1890s? The wages in the U.S. were so much higher than in the rest of the world; the immigrants were coming in; they were benefiting so much compared to where they came from in Poland, etc. But they still had a strong Left, and there's no reason why we can't have a strong Left in the U.S. I think a lot has to do with individual leaders.

DLJ: In your book, you write, "The New Left can scarcely be said to have self-consciously understood the shift that the US went through in the 1960s, since the greater part of the change was not manifest until the following decade, the era of 'deindustrialization,' when the US went off the gold standard, and neoliberalism began its ascent. But the radical youth of the sixties did grasp that the country was at a turning point."⁴ One, was there a Left then? Because It seems like there was something that distinguished the New Left from the preceding eras of the Left, which is that they seem to have been much less self-conscious of what was happening. Two, it seems like we're still living with a hangover from that. You were just saying that the power of the identity-politics paradigm is keeping people from being able to produce a new Left.

EZ: I'm not at all sure that we're not producing a Left. I agree that there's a problem, but I do think the New Left was fantastic. It was just as important as the Left that was based on the Industrial Revolution and labor. There are all these movements that we support today, that some people call the Left but not in the way we are using the word now. We would not call Gay Liberation today the Left, but in fact all of those movements were produced by the New Left. That's why I think that there was some wisdom in the people who said that they didn't want to talk about socialism all the time, that the issues were larger than socialism or different from socialism. There were issues of domination of the sort that Foucault was talking about for the first time in those years, and that the women's movement is about and a lot of anti-racism is about. I talk about this in the book. Gay Liberation started out by analogy to Vietnam. Vietnam was imperialist colonization, and homosexuals were colonized people who were revolting against their masters.

In that period, what really distinguished the New Left from the Old Left — one thing that strikes me — is the absence of historical consciousness. That was a fundamental contribution of Marxism. You still had that in the 60s. I'm writing a book on Walter Benjamin right now. This is something that Benjamin was aware of: the destruction of memory and history; everything being sped up; the loss of historical depth. In my lifetime, you could talk about everything historically: e.g., World War II brought such and such about, etc. I saw a movie called *Neighboring Sounds* (2012) from Brazil. It started with some black and white pictures, and you don't know what they were until the end, and then the movie turned to color — and it took place in an apartment house in Brazil, and it was a lot of random violence. You didn't understand it, but only at the end did it connect up with the black-and-white photographs which were all these things that were set in motion to create neoliberalism violently in the early 1980s in the countryside, which is where all of these things start. That profoundly struck me — how much you need historical consciousness to understand what's going on. That's also an answer to Martins's question about today's obstacles to a Left. That's one of the most profound and it goes beyond professional history. It has to do with popular understanding: it has to do with journalism and the public sphere.

RWM: In your book, you identify this question of the identity paradigm as something that we have inherited from the New Left. You mentioned how it was with the New Left that politics started to be more about individual groups and their individual power, rather than the State. It's interesting because in another book you wrote, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (1974), you were grappling with how the theoretical advances of Marxist feminism were actually falling below the threshold of what was historically understood as the relation between production and reproduction, becoming itself an obstacle to politics. Was this something that you were grappling with in the 70s? You are identifying that as a political problem right now, as an obstacle for the emergence of a Left or for the continuing advance of a new Left. What do you make of this legacy of the New Left that we've inherited that has come into this



Zaretsky's *Why America Needs a Left*